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VILNIUS FOR AMBASSADOR STEWART

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2018
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR BO
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES TEMPORARY DEPARTURE WITH
OPPOSITION

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Ambassador met March 12 with leaders of the Belarusian opposition to inform them of her impending departure for consultations in Washington. She reassured them that U.S. policy would remain firm: the release of all political prisoners is a precondition for any bilateral dialogue on improved relations. The opposition expressed its gratitude to the Ambassador and her team and expressed optimism that the GOB would comply if the EU brought its policies into closer accordance with Washington's. While disappointed to see the Ambassador depart, all seemed to accept that it was side effect of the necessary pressure on Lukashenko's regime. End summary.

¶2. (U) With many opposition leaders in Strasbourg for the European Parliament's Belarus Week, representatives attending the meeting were United Democratic Forces Co-Chair and United Civic Party Head Anatoliy Lebedko, Malady Front Chair Dmitriy Dashkevich, Belarusian Popular Front Deputy Head Ales Mikhalevich, Belarusian Party of Communists Deputy Yelena Skrigan, Belarusian Social Democratic Party-Gramada Deputy Chair Igor Rynkevich, For Freedom movement Deputy Chair Yuriy Gubarevich, Belarusian Christian Democracy Deputy Head Aleksey Shein, and Yuliya Kozulina (the younger daughter of Aleksandr Kozulin).

Ambassador Emphasizes No Change in Policy

¶3. (C) Ambassador announced that she would depart shortly for Washington for an undetermined period of time for consultations. She stressed that U.S. policy toward Belarus would continue unchanged. Ambassador explained that public statements would emphasize the necessity for the GOB to release Aleksandr Kozulin in order to bring about dialogue with the USG on improved bilateral relations. At the same time, private conversations with the GOB would make clear that new sanctions are possible if the human rights situation does not improve.

Opposition Hopeful EU Will Move Toward U.S. Position

¶4. (C) To a person all opposition leaders thanked Ambassador for her efforts and for the firm and clear U.S. policy on human rights. Kozulina said that "without you my family would not even hope for the expedited release of my father." Lebedko termed U.S. policy "perfect," but said coordination between Washington and the EU would give the GOB reason to

release political prisoners. Rynkevich also said the EU would have to take some initiative now, and hoped the USG and NATO would raise Belarus in talks with Moscow.

Comment

¶5. (C) The fact that Ambassador had to leave Belarus naturally disappointed the opposition leaders. Nonetheless, they seemed to appreciate the necessity of this strategic move in order to allow the Embassy to continue functioning effectively in support of democratic change. Dashkevich, the youngest member of the group, perhaps best summed up the shared sentiment, saying: "we see that standing up for the truth leads to confrontation, but in a battle between truth and lies we know who will win."

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